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ABSTRACT

A study examined the effects of a "pen pal" letter writing exchange on undergraduate college students and second grade children. Subjects, 23 second graders, completed a letter writing attitude survey, and then (after receiving an explanation of what a pen pal is) exchanged letters with the undergraduates over a 15-week period. Results demonstrated that second graders could and did participate successfully in a letter writing exchange. The most significant result, from the teacher's point of view, was that by the end of the project, all the children were correctly using the friendly letter form (heading, greeting, body, closing, signature), acquired in a natural way by modeling their own letters on the ones they received. On the pretest the majority of the children indicated they felt positive about receiving letters but felt unsure or negative about their ability to write letters. On the posttest, however, all responded positively regarding writing and receiving letters and expressed confidence in their own writing abilities. Findings showed that the children always had something to say in every letter, and that they even solicited help with their school work from their older pen pals. A peripheral benefit for reading was noted--each child read his or her letter carefully and usually read it aloud to a friend. (A list of refernces is appended.) (NKA)

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"My Pen Pal Goes to College":

A Functional Approach to Literacy Learning

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During the summer of 1985 I was teaching a graduate language arts class for teachers. Early in the course we got into one of those gripe sessions about how the school system makes effective teaching so difficult: the unrealistic time periods; the emphasis on separate skills in isolation from one another; teaching to the standardized tests; censorship of school books by outside elements; the ubiquitous bell system, etc. The cumulative result of this the teachers felt was that education had taken a giant step backwards: teachers afraid to deviate from the curriculum that was geared to upping the performance of students on multiple choice, minimum competency exams; students hesitant to express themselves or be creative in their work for fear of verbal rebuke or low grades. I mentioned how I felt similar frustrations with my own undergraduate students. For the most part they were very traditional in their views about schooling: children should stay in their seats and be quiet; textbooks, workbooks and ditto sheets were the main teaching tools; the basic skills in reading and writing needed to be mastered before creative activities were permitted. And this despite my proselytizing for the Language Experience Approach, Sustained Silent Reading, ReQuest, Writer's Workshop, Reader's Chair, etc.

In general the research literature for the language arts confirms these negative views. Instruction is approached in a fragmented fashion featuring isolated lessons in handwriting, spelling, phonics, punctuation and sentence diagramming all separated from one another (Holdaway, 1982; Harste, et.al., 1984). In most classrooms very little actual writing takes place (Graves, 1978a, 1978b; Potts, 1987). Instead, what is valued and emphasized in our schools is control, silence and passivity (Fine, 1987; Goodlad, 1984).

The result is that across the nation large numbers of students cannot write adequately (Applebee, Langer and Mulles, 1986).

At the end of that summer one second grade teacher approached me and asked if there wasn't something we could do to change this situation. Out of our talk grew the idea for an informal experiment involving college students and second graders. Our focus was on writing. Our vehicle was a pen pal letter exchange.

Why Let Children Write

Despite the emphasis on silence, control and the teaching of separate skills there are innumerable reasons for turning kids loose and letting them write. Philosophers, psychologists, and professional writers alike have noted the therapeutic values of putting ideas and feelings on paper (Palmer, 1987). Writing is also one of the best means we have for preserving experiences that we can enjoy anew ourselves and share with others (Tompkins, 1982). It is also an excellent vehicle for stimulating children's imagination and fostering creativity in the classroom (Petty, et.al., 1985). And, depending on the assignment, writing can be used to inform, to persuade and to entertain (Moffett and Wagner, 1976).

From the whole language perspective, we know that writing is also one of the integral links in communication. A decade ago linguists such as Carol Chomsky (1970, 1971) demonstrated that teaching young children to write first actually aids in the development of reading skills. Apparently the act of writing helps children to manipulate letters and words, to focus attention on meaning in print and in general to gain more control over their own language (Clay, 1975; Goodman and Goodman, 1983). In this way do young children begin to acquire a sense of the power of the word.

Most important of all is that writing aids thinking and can be used as a tool for learning in all content areas (Myers, 1984; Glatthorn, 1987). What is the relationship between writing and cognition? First, in young children writing (and reading) influences how they talk to themselves (Moffett, 1983). This inner speech has been closely linked to an early stage of cognitive development. Researchers like Moffett now believe that as a child's inner speech is modified through literary experiences, the thought processes are enlarged. Secondly, placing symbols on paper makes ideas concrete and available for inspection. The latter helps the child to organize his/her thoughts more clearly. And finally, as this organization process continues to shape thought it also provides an opportunity for new cognitive expansion and the emergence of more complex thinking (Haley-James, 1982).

Why Write Letters?

A few studies have examined the use of letter writing as a vehicle for teaching the process and skills involved in writing. (Milz, 1980; Greenless, et. al. 1984; Florio, 1979; Greene, 1983; Brazee and Kristo, 1986). However, most teachers tend to use letter writing, especially if taught from a textbook, solely to encourage proper form rather than as a vehicle for communication. Unfortunately this emphasis on form may inadvertently be making children more reluctant writers because they begin to believe that their ideas are not worthwhile.

There are at least three reasons for using letters to teach young children about writing. These are the concepts of audience, self, and social interaction. Although the act of writing may provide intrinsic pleasure for some students most writers write with a particular audience in mind. For young children the primary audience is the teacher. Stories and compositions are written for the teacher to read and occasionally to be displayed to a

wider audience through bulletin boards. Letter writing can immediately makes children aware of other audiences: friends, parents, pen pals, business organizations. Consequently as the child's concept of audience enlarges beyond the teacher, more and improved writing also results (Britton, 1975; Barnes, 1976).

Secondly, writers write best about that which they know best. This is the concept of self. Letter writing provides one of the best opportunities for children to tell about themselves, their families, friends and hobbies. Furthermore, during the process of writing children often discover (or rediscover) what they know, believe and feel because they must put their ideas down on paper. It is as if this knowledge lay dormant in the learner, awaiting an outlet.

The third concept, social interaction, lies at the heart of all forms of communication. Infants engage in oral language acquisition primarily when they respond and are responded to by adults in natural social settings, such as the home (Bissex, 1981). In school children are socialized to a wider world. Peer relationships take on a heretofore unrecognized importance. Through letter writing the child's social world is still further enlarged and print also takes on new meaning, as a way of maintaining relationships and sharing with friends in distant communities. Function always supersedes form in the whole language curriculum and in the natural world of literacy.

The Study

This study looked at the effects of a pen pal letter writing exchange on two different populations: undergraduate college students and second grade children. The present article confines itself to a discussion of the second graders.

At the beginning of the semester (September) the children were asked to take a letter writing attitude survey, modified from a Reading Attitude Survey

by Campbell (1966). The survey consisted of twelve questions related to letters. For each question there were five Snoopy figures representing Great Joy, Happiness, Neutral Feeling, Unhappy, and Anger. The children were directed to circle the picture that showed how they felt about the question read. After the survey had been completed the children were told that some college students wished to be their pen pals; the teacher explained what a pen pal was and the project began with the exchange of the first letters. Over the next 15 weeks the children wrote and received four letters each. At no time during this period were the children actually instructed in letter writing. In December the children were post tested on the attitude survey and their letters (collected by the college students) were analyzed.

The most significant result, from the point of view of the teacher, was that by the end of the 15 week period all 23 of the children were correctly using the form of the friendly letter (heading, greeting, body, closing, signature). Obviously, the students had acquired the form by modeling their own letters on the ones they had received. Here form followed function in a natural pattern of development. When placed in a real communicative situation these students responded without the prodding of formal instruction.

From the attitude survey the following information was gleaned. Before the pen pal exchange began half of the children had written and received letters (primarily notes from relatives). On the pretest the majority of the children were positive about receiving letters but unsure or negative about their ability to write letters. On the post test all of the children responded positively regarding writing and receiving letters and generally expressed confidence in their own writing and reading abilities.

An analysis of the content of the letters revealed a self-centered concern. All of the first letters contained physical descriptions of the

writer (either in words or pictures) and asked for the same from their pen pal. Interestingly the children also inquired of the marital status of their pen pals too. Later letters discussed their personal hobbies, pets, and a book read in class (How To Eat Fried Worms).

On one occasion a revealing incident occurred. Upon receipt of their third letter about half the college students remarked that their second graders were asking them questions about the Leaning Tower of Pisa in Italy. This seemed strange until I inquired of the teacher. She explained that a week earlier in a social studies lesson the class had been given an assignment to look up certain facts about Italy. These clever second graders were using their pen pals to help with their school work. Most significantly, these youngesters had discovered that letter writing could be used as a resource to gain information.

Another important result related to content was that all of the children had something to say in every letter. Unlike many typical writing assignments, where the blank page stops some children cold, here everyone wrote. Some wrote one or two sentences and drew a picture. Others wrote one or two pages. But everyone wrote. Futhermore they wrote without interruption and without an over concern about accuracy in spelling or punctuation, which are the two pitfalls that cause most creative writing periods to degenerate into a sea of waving hands.

An analysis of the skills used in the letters was also revealing. The majority of the children, once they received a letter, proceeded to write their response in a listing fashion to the questions asked. Although most did use complete sentences only three of the children utilized paragraphs or transition between sentences. Often there were words missing, especially the lead information to questions they were answering. It was as if the children

assumed their pen pal had the original letter in front of them. Furthermore, approximately half of the children did use proper punctuation and capitalization although this was not stressed by the teacher. And finally, all of the spelling errors were phonetically accurate, supporting the developmental concept of invented spelling as a natural growth stage (Gentry, 1987).

Although the focus of this study was on writing a peripheral benefit was noted for reading. Every two weeks a large manila envelope would arrive at the elementary school. This became "mail day" for the second graders. One child was appointed to go to the office, retrieve the envelope and then deliver the mail by reading off the names of the children on the individual envelopes inside the large one. Then the real fun began. Each child opened his/her letter and read it carefully. Next some children would read their letters aloud to a friend. Soon everyone was sharing the enthusiasm they felt for their pen pal letter with others.

Both the teacher and I were struck (1) by the written communicative competence of these second graders and (2) by the variety of skill ability in a supposedly homogeneous class. First, in terms of competence, these second graders could and did participate successfully in a letter writing exchange. Yet, according to the state curriculum guide, the friendly letter form will be taught to these children in the third grade and reviewed in the fourth grade. Secondly, the variety of writing skill ability of these second graders challenges the whole notion of a group, scope and sequence approach to instruction. Neither the teacher nor I were surprised by this, but it did confirm our suspicion that what is taking place in some classrooms through a natural approach to literacy acquisition is at loggerheads with what the mandated state curriculum and textbooks tell us should be taking place.

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